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SUBJECT: GROWING DIVIDE WITHIN PRESIDENT VENETIAAN'S  
COALITION

PARAMARIBO 00000219 001.2 OF 002

REFTELS: (A) 05 PARAMARIBO 768

11. (SBU) Summary. Eight months into his second consecutive term, President Ronald Venetiaan is presiding over an increasingly fractured eight-party coalition. The all-Maroon (descendants of escaped slaves) A-Combination (AC) is in a coalition standoff with the President's New Front grouping over a bill concerning unlawful occupation of property. Members of the Javanese-based Pertjaja Luhur (PL) are refusing to attend sessions of the National Assembly to protest President Venetiaan's public admonishment of a PL minister. Meanwhile the Hindustani-based United Reform Party (VHP) is cracking from within as splinter groups are pressing for more internal party democracy, undermining Vice-President and party chair Ramdien Sardjoe's control. This recent escalation of coalition infighting has many observers questioning whether the governing coalition will stay together until the next scheduled election in four years. Sounding the death knell for the coalition is premature, however, as for the moment the parties still appear inclined to limp forward as a group in order to remain in power. The result will be a cautious president and cabinet preoccupied with balancing competing interests. This cable, which is the first in a series of cables on the fractured coalition, focuses on the pivotal AC. End Summary.

12. (U) With the loss of its parliamentary majority in the May 2005 election, President Ronald Venetiaan's four party New Front coalition (the Creole-based NPS, labor-oriented SPA, VHP, and PL) was forced to caucus with the three party AC coalition and the single seat DA91 party to form a governing coalition dubbed the New Front Plus. The 2005 election represented a political watershed for the Maroon community as three all-Maroon parties (ABOP, BEP, and SEEKA) united to form a coalition and for the first time won parliamentary seats (five of 51) and secured cabinet positions (three of 17). Their success brought not only a previously underrepresented ethnic group into the forefront of Surinamese politics, but turned them into critical dealmakers.

13. (U) Smooth cooperation within the New Front Plus has been elusive since its formation. Simmering troubles erupted on April 4 when AC parliamentarians refused to attend a DNA session, preventing the formation of a quorum

and scuttling an expected vote on a bill concerning unlawful occupation of property and buildings. New Front leaders claimed the AC members never raised their objections to the bill until the day of the vote, while deputy DNA speaker Caprino Alendy, a former International Visitor's Program participant, maintained that New Front leaders paid no attention to proposed AC changes prior to the session.

14. (SBU) AC members oppose the bill, claiming it would enable the government to easily evict Maroons from their traditional lands because the bill's definition of a plot of land could be interpreted to include the undemarcated interior territory used by Maroon communities. The intent of the original bill, however, was more to address illegal occupation of clearly defined land plots and buildings and to give law enforcement the tools to evict squatters. Because there are several Maroon "squatter villages" in Paramaribo that would be jeopardized by the proposed law, some are questioning whether the AC's objections are more related to keeping illegally occupied property in the hands of Maroon groups in Paramaribo, where the AC has one DNA seat.

15. (U) The vote has been postponed to give the AC and New Front leadership a chance to hash out a compromise bill, but finding common ground may be difficult as Alendy wants the complex and long-ignored issue of land rights for indigenous groups to be included in the parliamentary debate. Maroon groups in the interior often do not have title to the land on which they live and farm, which creates social tensions particularly when traditional Maroon land overlaps private mining concessions granted by the government.

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FORMER JUNGLE COMMANDO LEADER BRUNSWIJK STILL A LOOSE  
CANNON

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16. (SBU) Adding to coalition instability is former Jungle Commando rebel leader, convicted narcotics trafficker, and AC parliamentarian Ronnie Brunswijk's hostile stance towards his coalition's plan to sell the state-owned lumber company Bruynzeel to Dutch-Belgian concern Doorwin. Brunswijk, who holds a large wood concession himself, heavily criticized a Letter of Intent (LOI) submitted for DNA approval by President Venetiaan's cabinet. Only after long and tortuous debate did the New Front Plus majority approve the LOI on March 30, but with Brunswijk abstaining from the vote, putting him not only at odds with the New Front, but fellow AC leaders. Brunswijk is also rankling the New Front by leading an effort to place fellow AC members in key positions on the boards of various state-owned companies.

17. (SBU) Brunswijk's unpredictable and aggressive nature (also a former bank robber, he recently brandished a gun at soccer match, threatening the other team) is in stark contrast to the traditional, slow-moving politics of compromise associated with President Venetiaan. The president faces little choice but to tolerate and appease the influential, yet impetuous Brunswijk in order to keep his majority in tact. The President's decision to join forces with Brunswijk upset many in the political establishment, who see the ex-jungle commando as a thug, as well as many in the military, who fought against him in the interior war of the late 1980's.

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OPPOSITION ALSO FIGHTING FOR HEARTS AND MINDS OF MAROONS  
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18. (SBU) For AC leaders, it is a political necessity to

appear strong on the issue of land rights, a top concern for their Maroon constituents, to enable them to fend off a direct challenge for the hearts and minds of their electorate from the largest opposition party National Democratic Party (NDP), chaired by former military dictator and convicted narcotics trafficker Desi Bouterse. (See reftel). Over the last several months, the NDP has been attempting to tap into pockets of Maroon discontent and promote itself as the defender of Maroon interests. The NDP too is opposed to the unlawful occupation bill, claiming the bill will force Maroons off their land. By the NDP keeping the political pressure on the AC, AC leaders will be compelled to be out in front of the land rights issue even if their position is at odds with other New Front Plus partners. Some political observers comment that the NDP's true goal is to drive a wedge between coalition partners by focusing on its perceived weakest link, the AC.

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COMMENT  
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19. (SBU) Inter-coalition squabbling has preoccupied the New Front Plus since coming together several months ago and set the government on a plodding, cautious course. Having to swallow the demands of its new AC partner and to share the political spoils of an election has been difficult for the New Front. Long-standing ethnic prejudice against Maroons, which has resurfaced lately after a Maroon man allegedly brutally murdered a Hindustani women, may also be playing a role in the reluctance of some New Front members to think of the AC as an equal partner. On the other side, the mostly politically inexperienced AC has faced a steep learning curve in the art of political compromise. The AC parties are under intense scrutiny from the Maroon community to fulfill inflated expectations and to push through their agenda, which can sometimes put the AC at odds with coalition partners. While the fissures in the coalition are quickly growing, they are yet not permanent cracks, as all sides still seem willing to work towards acceptable compromise in order to continue holding onto the reigns of power.

BARNES